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## IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF THE WORLD

### THE PROSPECTS OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE MODERN WORLD

PETER JONKERS

#### 1. Is there still a future for religion?

What will be the prospects for religion at the end of modernity? Until recently, the actual, empirical answer to this question seemed rather obvious: the processes of rationalisation, self-determination (autonomy), and individualisation had disenchanting the world, weakening the sense of the sacred. Moreover, the secularisation-thesis, according to which the steady loss of influence and importance of religion and church in society and culture is one of the most prominent features of modernity, offered a similar interpretation. From a philosophical perspective, these views on the prospects of religion were accompanied and supported by the so-called 'masters of suspicion'. They profoundly marked the religious debate during the past century. Their propositions are common knowledge: According to Marx, religion is an alienated consciousness, while in the eyes of Freud, it is the result of an infantile illusion, and for Nietzsche a manifestation of slave morality. Together they have given a certain intellectual plausibility to non-religious points of view. As a result of this, being non-religious has become the social and intellectual standard, whereas a religious perspective on humanity and the world is now the exception.

Are these well-known answers still determinative for the debate about the prospects of religion in our time? Or will religion, like every other major symbolic system, remain an inexhaustible source of ways to experience the world and of orientations for action, which can help people time and again to answer the eternal questions about the origin and destination of humanity and the world? According to many authoritative interpretations, the relationship of contemporary man with modernity is changing, and consequently attitudes towards religion are changing too. On the one hand, humanity is still in the midst of the large social and cultural current of modernisation. On the other, we are 'sitting on the shoulders of modernity'. This implies that contemporary

mankind can distance itself critically from the central stories that modern civilisation tells about itself, especially with regard to the prospects of religion. These stories have lost a great deal of their self-evidence. This situation offers religious intellectuals the opportunity to ask and answer questions about the prospects of religion in contemporary society in a new way.

In this article, I want to take this question as my guide. In my view, it is not primarily a sociological, but rather a philosophical question. The results of recent sociological research on this topic are by no means unambiguous. According to many observers the religious climate is changing, but it remains to be seen how radical and enduring these changes will be and which direction they will take. Since it is impossible to predict the actual future of religion in a reliable way, it makes more sense to me to reformulate the question raised above as a fundamental one with regard to the prospects of religion in our time. Can Christianity make an essential contribution to the main issues with which contemporary people and their culture are confronted? My way of presenting this question implies that I do not think about religion at the level of actual developments, possibly extrapolated towards the future, but at the level of its fundamental prospects.

The title of my article already indicates the direction of my answer to this question. Within the context of the ongoing theological discussion, it has a somewhat polemical connotation. It seems to me that many contemporary Christians, impressed as they are by the enormous success of modernity at the scientific, social and cultural level, tend to accept its basic principles of modernity in an uncritical way. After a long period of massive resistance to modern civilisation, many committed Christians welcomed the secularisation-movement of the sixties with a sense of great relief. They wanted to be absorbed as rapidly and completely as possible into modern civilisation. This process ran parallel to social and economic emancipation, which in its turn intensified secularisation. As a consequence of this, many among the faithful found themselves intellectually confronted with the question of what the meaning of their faith could (still) be in that modern, secularised world in which they felt so well at home. But by framing their question in this way, they in fact accepted modernity as the standard for their faith. This implies that faith has to be '*neuezeitgemäss*' (in accordance with modernity), and that it has to be judged with respect to the degree to which it contributes to the realisation of the ideals of modernity, viz. rationalisation, self-determination, and individualisation. However understandable the secularisation-movement may have been from a historical and sociological perspective, I nevertheless think that 'the degree of conformity to a dominant civilisation' can never be a

valid criterion for judging the prospects of Christianity. If Christian religion is absorbed completely by contemporary culture, then the former threatens to lose its prophetic force. Consequently, it loses its meaning for present-day civilisation. Therefore, the question of the relationship between Christianity and modernity needs to be asked and answered differently. The question is not so much about the remaining significance of religion, seen from the point of view of the self-evident truth and value of the ideals of modernity, but rather the reverse – namely the significance of modernity from the perspective of Christian faith. This boils down to the question of how Christians, starting from their own religious tradition, can contribute to modern civilisation in a critical way. Every culture needs people who point to the idolatry and foolishness of current thinking, who call attention to valuable traditions that might have fallen into disuse. Therefore, I have chosen a central idea from the high-priestly prayer of Christ as the title of my article: the Christian stands *in* the world, but is not *of* the world.<sup>1</sup>

To begin with, I want to answer this question in the light of an analysis of Gianni Vattimo's recent book, *Belief*, in which he presents his interpretation of the relation between Christianity and modernity. As Guido Vanheeswijck pointed out in the introduction to this volume, Vattimo is an outspoken advocate of a complete secularisation of Christian faith, but for him this does not imply its dissolution. He considers the Christian commandment of love as the limit to all secularisation. For me, Vattimo's analysis of the relationship between Christianity and modernity raises all sorts of questions: religious, theological and philosophical. Is the theme of the *majestas domini*, so often represented on the tympana of Romanesque churches, merely a relic of a dark and bizarre period in history, or does it symbolise an essential aspect of Christian faith? Can the *kenosis* be put on a par with the invalidation of God's transcendence? May caritas be reduced to a purely immanent category? How can the Christian, who accepts Vattimo's proposals concerning the reinterpretation of the relation between Christianity and modernity, avoid the risk of becoming *of* the world instead of being *in* the world? Can Nietzsche's and Heidegger's nihilism be put on a par with the essence of Christianity? In my view, the answers to these questions will probably show that Vattimo's reconstruction of both Christianity and certain trends in contemporary philosophy is disputable. But I am not concerned with these questions in this article.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Jo. 17, 11–18.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. the article of Th. De Wit in this volume for a critical discussion of Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche.

question I want to raise is whether a completely secularised Christianity is capable of providing answers to the critical queries of contemporary mankind with regard to modernity. In order to examine the tenability of Vattimo's views, I will confront them with Charles Taylor's analysis of modernity.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The unbearable lightness of being

As Vanheeswijck shows in his introduction, Vattimo states that in late-modernity humanity is confronted with all sorts of problems that seem to be unsolvable with the means of reason and technology. In particular, he refers to the faith in the exclusive truth of experimental science and the conviction that history was to develop towards a complete emancipation of humanity from every transcendent authority. This conviction offered modernity its most important reason to reject God and religion: Atheism stated that religion would be enfeebled by scientific rationality, or would be superseded by the development of reason towards complete self-control. Thus, with its inner-worldly principles of explanation, modern rationality had disenchanted religion. Well, this faith in the radically disenchanting capacities of modern reason has become incredible because of the crisis into which rationality seems to have led. This crisis is the consequence of a number of problems that have come to the fore during the last century. They can be brought together under the heading of the awareness that modern rationality involves its own mechanisms of violence and repression. In its technological guise rationalism led to a manipulation of man and nature. In its historical-philosophical guise it caused the tragedy of totalitarian oppression. As a result of a more profound insight into these processes, this disenchanting rationalism is itself disenchanted: "We are all by now used to the fact that disenchantment has also produced a radical disenchantment with the idea of disenchantment itself; or, in other words, that demythification has finally turned against itself, recognising that even the ideal of the elimination of myth is a myth."<sup>4</sup> Certain influential philosophical interpretations of modernity, such as Heidegger's and Habermas's, confirm the point Vattimo makes. Nevertheless I want to remark that this image is rather one-sided, because it identifies the essence of modernity as such with one of its aspects, viz. enlightened rationalism. That is why

<sup>3</sup> Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. C.U.P., Cambridge, 1989, 601 p., and *idem*, *The Malaise of Modernity*. Anasi, Concord (Ontario), 1991.

<sup>4</sup> G. Vattimo, *Belief*. Translated by Luca D'Isanto and David Webb. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999, 29. Henceforth I shall refer to this book in the main text as (*Belief*,...).

we have to make a more balanced analysis of modernity. As mentioned above, I shall, in doing so, follow Charles Taylor's examination of the sources of modernity. He presents a historically more accurate picture of modernity, thus offering us a better insight into the complexity of its crisis. This view provides us with new opportunities for finding a way out of the crisis.

A first dominating factor of modernity is the development of a new conception of hums. Two elements are of overall importance in this process. On the one hand, in the course of the 17th century a moral ideal of self-disposal and rational autonomy arises. The human 'self' comes to be opposed to nature and is conceived of as pure inwardness. As a consequence of this, the well-known subject-object scheme comes into being. Thanks to this scheme humans can take both nature and themselves as objects of observation. A radical reflexivity thus enters into humanity's thinking about itself. This clears the way for the typical modern processes of reflexive control and methodical disciplining of the world. As a result of this man becomes the 'master and possessor of nature', which results in the scientific faith that, with the help of science, humans can find solutions to all problems. Similarly, they become possessors of themselves and their history. This is evident from the modern will to control and discipline everything, which takes possession of humans both as an individual and as social beings. A clear-cut idea of normality arises, within which men have to be active in order to be able to live as economically, socially, politically and medically acceptable beings. Foucault's analyses of the history of madness, the prison system, sexuality etc. show this very clearly.

However, we owe our contemporary conception of humanity not only to the universal, rational 'self' of the Enlightenment, but perhaps even more to the creative, individual 'self' of Romanticism. This is the other, often forgotten element in the development of modern identity. At the end of the 18th century, the conviction arises that every one of us owns an original way of being human, every person has his or her own measure. Consequently, everybody has to discover for him or herself what it means to be a person. This cannot be discovered by consulting already existing models and patterns, but can only be determined and expressed by the individual person in an absolutely original way. Taylor calls this ideal of individual and original self-expression 'expressivity'. This term refers to the link between the discovery of oneself on the one hand, and artistic creation on the other. In this context, the conception of what humanity typically is or ought to be changes dramatically: The philosopher, being the paradigmatic ideal during the Enlightenment, makes way for the romantic artist. Moreover, art is no longer primarily defined as

imitation, *mimêsis* of eternal models and patterns, but rather in terms of original creative power. Being faithful to myself thus means being faithful to my own originality, which I alone can discover and express. If I am not faithful in this way to myself, I miss my purpose in life, I miss what it means for *me* to be human. The ideal of authenticity thus attributes an essential moral importance to a kind of intimate contact with oneself, with one's inner nature. Initially, the romantics were convinced that the nature within man, the nature outside man, and Christian, institutionalised morality would make up a harmonious whole. But in the course of the 19th century, this conception of harmony came under increasing pressure. It was considered a remnant of the pre-modern, sacred order, which oppresses the originality and creativity of the individual 'self'. Under the influence of thinkers like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the conviction gained ground that humans are only loyal to their most intimate essence and destiny insofar as they resist all conformity, and eventually reject (institutionalised) morality as a suppression of their unique authenticity. This emotive, strictly individualistic notion of the 'self' is nowadays as dominant as the ideal of rational self-control. Against this background, it becomes understandable why so many people only accept something as true or good, if 'they can recognise themselves in it'. Thus, moral and intellectual opinions are usually not based upon reason or the nature of things, but upon the fact that we as individuals feel ourselves attracted to them, because they are an adequate expression of our original self-awareness. Consequently they lose all solidity and substance.<sup>5</sup>

A second dominating factor of modernity is the development of a new conception of rationality: the primacy of objectifying, instrumental reason.<sup>6</sup> Above, I mentioned this in the context of the objectifying attitude of humanity towards nature. But this new type of rationality was extended to innumerable other domains of individual and social life. Humanity makes use of this rationality in calculating the most economical employment of means to realise a given goal. Maximal efficiency, the best ratio between expenses and profits, is the standard of this rationality. In this development, the disenchantment already mentioned by Vattimo, plays a crucial role. When the structure of society is no longer sacred and the social order is no longer founded on the order of nature or the will of God, humans can autonomously invent new patterns of behaviour and reasoning, in which the maximisation of individual comfort is the utmost goal. People become calculating citizens

<sup>5</sup> Ch. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 60 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Ch. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 5.

while determining maximal individual happiness. The importance of instrumental reason is further strengthened by the fact that it is not only a matter of subjective convictions, but is rooted firmly in various kinds of social mechanisms. Therefore some people have the impression that they live in an iron cage, from which no escape is possible.<sup>7</sup>

So far, Taylor's analysis of modernity runs to a large extent parallel to Vattimo's. Their major point of disagreement is that the latter interprets disenchantment as something positive, and as a source of resistance to the violence of instrumental reason, whereas the former puts disenchantment on a par with instrumental reasoning. Below, I shall return to this point. Before confronting these views, however, let us follow Taylor a little further still in his critique of certain aspects of modernity. He not only agrees with Vattimo's analysis of modernity, but also with his conclusion that modernity is in a crisis. According to Taylor, this crisis is caused by the structural tension between the ideal of autonomous, rational self-possession and instrumental rationality on the one hand, and the sense that this ideal has repressed important elements of personal and social life on the other. Let us take a closer look at this critique of modernity.<sup>8</sup>

A first aspect of the crisis of modernity is a consequence of the detached (objectifying) and instrumentalist way of life and reasoning of the Enlightenment. It divests life of ultimate meaning and is a threat to public freedom. Our instrumentalist society is characterised by a utilitarian approach to values and ultimately to humanity itself as well. It is tied up with institutions that have a commercial, capitalist or bureaucratic way of acting. As a consequence of this, life loses its richness, depth and meaning; everything is in principle negotiable, has a price, nothing retains an intrinsic value. Instrumental reason threatens to reduce man to a production and consumption factor, to an object of medical care, to a locus of action for social normalisation and discipline etc. No more room is left for heroism, aristocratic values, and the best things in life. In short, there are no substantial values that make life worth living, because everything is basically replaceable. Instrumental reason brings this about through the images of life, which it impresses (e.g. by the mass media), and through inducing and promoting an instrumentalist attitude towards life (e.g. by the consumption-society). In this way all traditional forms of community languish; they give way to contracts, based on mutual interest. This development produces a separation within us, namely between

<sup>7</sup> Ch. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 93 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 499 ff.

instrumental reason on the one hand, and the sense of the depth and richness of life on the other. Moreover, it isolates people as calculating citizens. In sum, instrumental reason brings about a fragmentation of the 'self' and an atomisation of society.

The primacy of instrumentalist reasoning implies a threat to public freedom too. In modernity, a procedural notion of justice and ethics becomes dominant, suppressing a substantial conception of the good. Instrumentalist reasoning is not capable of recognising intrinsically valuable ends, reaching further than utilitarian ones. Examples of these are the realisation of someone's expressive potential as an end in itself, the recognition that nature has more than an instrumental meaning, the awareness that conceptions of the substantially good are necessary for the identity of the 'self' etc. It is typical of a liberal society, with its detached reason, that it interferes as little as possible in the way citizens choose to give meaning to their lives. They are autonomous persons, and the state should refrain from overtly manipulating the orientation of their lives. Modern society exists by the grace of religious and philosophical pluralism. In order to channel this pluralism, modern society develops principles of justice, i.e. procedural rules meant to ensure that the debate on the substance of the good life proceeds correctly. Usually this correctness consists in safeguarding the autonomy and freedom of the members of society under all circumstance. Although a pluralistic view of values and the right to self-determination and autonomy are essential to modern society and thus cannot be given up, this liberal discourse fails to achieve a clear grasp of the social-ethical problems involved. In spite of the alleged neutrality of the liberal state, this proposition is only valid on the abstract level of (procedural) principles. Its necessary substantial interpretations of notions like right and justice are positively based on substantial conceptions of the good. The expressivist reaction to the dominance of instrumental reason, for its part, provokes a second aspect of the crisis of modernity, viz. the impasse of subjectivism. Nowadays, the ideal of the expressivist, individualist 'self' takes the form of the ideology of self-fulfilment. Its central values are self-realisation, self-determination, the discovery of one's own inner richness etc. As these words indicate, these values exclusively emphasise the isolated, individual 'self'. Consequently, the language of morals and politics, which is based on these values, sinks to a rather pale, subjectivist discourse on someone's strictly personal or private values. All values that cannot be reduced to one's own 'self', are shrugged off as illusory. A true conception of self-realisation, however, presupposes that the importance of some things surpasses the 'self'. Similarly, there are conceptions of the good and ends of life that are worth-

while as such and offer an intrinsic fulfilment. A consequent subjectivism leads to emptiness; in a world where subjective self-fulfilment is the only thing that counts, any fulfilment loses its importance.

The foregoing does not imply that subjectivism is bad as such. Rather it has to be joined to an idea of life that is orientated towards a notion of the good, which exceeds the 'self'. We are confronted here with a typically modern problem. The explicit discourse of the modern 'self' consists of leaving open every substantial interpretation of the good, because this substance needs to come from the 'self'. But implicitly there are of course lots of substantial purposes and values, from which the 'self' derives its meaning. Since this implicit awareness is being suppressed by the modern conception of man as a self-determining being, it constantly threatens to become what it desperately wants to avoid, viz. empty, meaningless, and therefore trivial. Thus modern men and women are confronted time and again with the necessity to choose between various different lifestyles. But at the same time they realise that every choice is arbitrary, because they have set their varying moods, subjective preferences and unconscious needs as the only standard for their choice. They suffer from what M. Kundera called 'the unbearable lightness of being'. A third and last aspect of the crisis of modernity also results from the tension between universal, moral norms and standards on the one hand, and conceptions of the good, functioning as sources of morality, on the other. The general agreement on moral norms and standards in our society hides a deep uncertainty and disagreement on what constitutes the good. Across all the religious, political and ideological divisions, modern society shows a remarkable consensus about vital moral standards and norms; usually, people agree that mankind has to take care of the lives and wellbeing of everybody, that justice among nations needs to be promoted. Broadly speaking, humanity avows the human rights declaration as its universal moral creed. The fact that our actual behaviour often does not (sufficiently) satisfy these norms, that there is a lot of hypocrisy involved in people's subscribing to them, does not alter the fact that they are universally accepted. At the same time, however, modern people feel a fundamental uncertainty about the sources that are required to support their commitment to these far-reaching demands of morality and justice. These moral sources are positive values, – they refer to the good, which we strive for in our actions. For us as morally acting beings, it is essential to experience that it is worthwhile to help other people or to treat them rightly, to experience what human dignity implies, what it means that God's love is meant for all people etc. What is at stake here, is the relationship between norms and values. In common parlance, these terms are often used indiscriminately. Nevertheless it

is essential for the sake of moral action to determine their relation more precisely. Usually norms appear as obligations, formulated in a negative way: Thou shall not kill, thou shall not give false witness etc. Basically, they are characterised by an effective negativity. In this sense they put a stop to certain human desires. However, if these moral norms only appear as obligations, as general demands of morality, they run the risk of remaining a dead letter. Then their negativity is no longer effective. This gives rise to a morality of obligation, which is merely repressive. But such a negative morality does not persist for very long and tends to become perverse. We only have to recall Nietzsche's criticism of Christian morality to get some striking examples of this tendency and to conclude that it is by no means imaginary. Therefore, it is important to fill out such norms with concrete experiences of the good. If the negativity of norms is to remain effective, they have to be counterbalanced by positive values. Thus, people need values or moral sources in order to commit themselves to moral norms. The fundamental problem of modernity in this respect is that a structural tension exists between these two dimensions of morality. The modern, procedural conception of ethics strongly advances a formal morality of obligation. But at the same time it results in the awareness that the importance of moral sources is being lost sight of. Above all, procedural ethics seeks to be religiously and philosophically neutral, it does not want to impose values on people. This neutrality has as its consequence that these values, experiences of the good, become something subjective and are driven back to the sphere of private life. There is hardly any public debate about them. In this way, these moral sources threaten to run dry.

### 3. Is an ethics of non-violence possible?

Let us go back to the central issue of this article, viz. whether Christianity can offer something essential to modern humanity and its culture. Philosophers like Vattimo and Taylor point out that the success-story, which modernity has told over and over again about itself, has become incredible. It conceals or represses the drawbacks, failures, and perhaps even the crisis of modernity. As seen above, Vattimo and Taylor substantiated this by analysing the problems caused by instrumental reason and the idea that humanity can radically dispose of itself and of the history of humankind. The question arises whether these thinkers, sitting on the shoulders of modernity, can also offer us ideas that contribute to the solution of these problems. My first question in this section concerns Vattimo: Does his book offer an indication of how to overcome the crisis of modernity, and what role does Christian religion play in this



process? Of course, the issue of the violence of controlling reason is of crucial importance here. As Vanheeswijck shows in the introduction to this volume, Vattimo is quite explicit about the capacities of Christianity to present to contemporary humanity a way out of the crisis of reason. In particular, he advocates a secularised Christianity; according to him, it is only the commandment of *caritas*, of non-violent love, that can set limits to secularisation. On the basis of this view of the prospects of Christianity, my second, critical question is whether Vattimo's approach really offers a way out of the crisis of modernity. Both these questions concern essential elements of Vattimo's interpretation of modernity and his ideas of finding a solution to its problems. In the context of my article, however, they are also of importance as articulations of influential intellectual positions with regard to modernity and its crisis.

The hard core of the crisis of modernity lays in the understanding of its violent and oppressive character. It becomes manifest on several occasions and in very different shapes: First of all, the violence of the objectifying rationality of technology and science is at stake here, as well as the will of humanity to control the course of history, ending in totalitarianism. Vattimo connects this oppression with specific kinds of religious violence. In this connection, he thinks of the violence resulting from the sacred dimension of nature, and from a similar sacredness, typical of a lot of ecclesiastical decisions, which leads to authoritarianism etc. Of course, these features are by no means specifically modern, but one can safely state that they have pursued themselves to the end during modernity. They have become manifest in the religious wars and other forms of religious intolerance, in the oppression of certain groups of believers, such as women and homosexuals. According to Vattimo, this violence is the result of a way of thinking, which attributes to the deity all the characteristics of omnipotence, absoluteness, eternity and transcendence over against powerless, contingent, temporal man, or attributes these qualities to the doctrinal authority of the church. When religious authorities are, in the name of the deity, adorned with such an omnipotence, exceeding the bounds of human finitude, it is easy to make a sharp distinction between the faithful and heretics, between those who obey God's commandments and those who violate them, between the chosen and the damned. Here we get an idea of the way in which the violence of reason specifically takes shape in religion. At the basis of all these violent manifestations of technology, politics, and religion lies the illusory conviction that the true nature of reality, the meaning of history, and the will of God can be established objectively, once and for all, and for all people. Such a conviction inevitably leads to violence, more par-

ticularly to an oppression of subjective, historical, contingent, and vulnerable human beings.

At the conclusion of his analysis of the violent character of modernity, Vattimo asks how we can and should deal with it. Divergent ideas, such as nihilism, weak thinking, secularisation, *kenosis*, etc. (all having an explicitly favourable meaning for Vattimo) can all be seen as attempts to unmask the fateful faith in controlling reason, history, and the transcendent God, and to counter the violence and oppression that stem from it. The world, humanity and history can never be fixed or closed. According to this way of thinking, we have to demythologise all fixed moralities or established dogmas, and treat them as historical constructions. Finally, we should no longer view God as a transcendent ruler, but as a friend. Formulated positively, these remarks lead to an ethics of non-violent love, limiting secularisation and offering humanity a reference point in history. With his view Vattimo reformulates at a theoretical level some of the popular answers to the contemporary discouragements and discontents with regard to modernity.

Following Taylor, we can interpret weak thinking as a radicalised romantic protest against the violence of controlling reason. On the one hand there is the increasing control by technological and organisational reason, which rationalises, disciplines, and normalises our lives more and more: As I remarked above, Romanticism is a radical protest against this tendency. It stresses the authenticity of the individual, the importance of creative imagination, the unbound originality of the human mind, the primacy of sense (the latter being more basic to humanity than reason), the non-controlling relationship with nature etc. In line with Nietzsche and Heidegger, Vattimo radicalises this protest by stating that the (romantic) harmonious unity of human nature in all its aspects, with nature outside the human, has to be exposed as a metaphysical rest and thus be repudiated. Consequently, all references to a true world, substance etc. lose their ground, because they are without exception manifestations of a (violent) objectification and oppression, produced by a transcendent authority. Weak thinking unmasks the idea of a true, objective reality as a construction and product of the finite subject. What is left, is the radical freedom, historicity and finitude of being, and "an increasingly materialistic, consumerist and Babel-like world, wherein different systems of value might intersect and coexist, so as to make a 'true' morality apparently impossible, and where the play of interpretations (once again, in the Babel of the mass media) might seem to make any access to the truth impossible" (*Belief*, 52). This world is bounded only by the commandment of love.

Vattimo criticises metaphysical thinking because it imposes an established order on humanity, because it presents reality as given and disposable, as having a fixed value and truth, perhaps even provided with a transcendent, sacral legitimisation. In particular, metaphysics is violent, since it one-sidedly puts the stress of all meaning, truth and value on objectivity, which in the end completely subjects individual humans. Vattimo sets himself up as the spokesman of our time: He reacts against this form of violence and inverts the relation between the absolute, sacral order and subjected humanity completely. It is not a reversal of the metaphysics of objectivity into the metaphysics of subjectivity. This would be impossible for a philosophy that thinks in terms of dissolution, finitude, and historicity. The *complete* reversal consists in replacing controlling, objectifying reason by a nihilistic subjectivism. The core of this subjectivity is not transcendental subjectivity as a universal foundation of the process of giving meaning (as is the case in the metaphysics of subjectivity), but a plurality of finite, individual, historical and material subjects, who are simply so many local points of conveying meaning.

The crucial question in this context is whether Vattimo's ideas are capable of putting an end to the modern violence of reason. My main objection to his attempt at countering the control of objectifying and planning reason with the help of weak thinking is that it is stuck in an oppositional way of thinking, in a dualism of strong versus weak, violent versus non-violent, established objectivity versus nihilistic openness etc. Of all things, this way of thinking is typical of the metaphysical tradition, against which Vattimo reacts. Let me specify my critique. A primordial problem is that this dualistic way of thinking generates its own forms of determination and schematisation of plural reality, and consequently commits violence itself.<sup>9</sup> In its defence, one could observe that it concerns only the violence of interpreting reason, which remains limited to the order of thinking. However, a much more important question is whether weak thinking is capable of suppressing or even diminishing the real violence of discipline and normalisation, as the ethics of non-violence seems to promise. Nihilistic subjectivism – as much as technological, controlling thinking, – remains caught in the typically modern (metaphysical) subject-object scheme, in which the one pole is the exclusive source of giving meaning, whereas the other can only receive meaning. Now, the question is whether the reversal of this scheme can put an end to violence. In my view, violence is inherently present in this scheme as such, and is consequently not

<sup>9</sup> I shall not pursue here the obvious criticism that the image of metaphysics, presented by Vattimo, is historically by no means correct.

limited to its objective pole. I agree with Vattimo that there is such a thing as the violence of objectifying, controlling reason; the universality of its concepts violently reduces the richness and diversity of being and history to a dull sameness. But is the universality reason aims at necessarily violent? And furthermore, isn't there violence in subjectivist reason as well? I am referring here to the ruthless will of the contingent, historical subject to dissolve all substantiality, anything which gives content to life, whatever is sufficiently worthwhile for people to devote their lives to, by considering them as constructions of the finite and local subject. Isn't the self-evidence with which this is stated also an act of violence? Notably, concepts like subjectification and the dissolution of strong structures get similar universalistic status in comparison to that of objectification and the fixation of truth and value. Consequently, it is hardly clear why the universalistic character of objectification should be violent, whereas the equally universalistic character of subjectification would suppress this violence. Reflecting on this issue in an unbiased manner, one has to conclude that the method of subjectifying reason to reduce substantiality to subjective constructions is no less violent than the method of objectifying reason to reduce the same substantiality to established and controllable objects. Since Vattimo equates all objectification *by definition* with violence and oppression, he is convinced that the suppression of this objectification must put an end to all violence in the world. Therefore, he is blind for the violence that is present in subjectifying reason.

In his analysis of modernity, Taylor makes clear that this violence of subjectification is by no means imaginary and finds its concrete expression in various practices. Contemporary humanity is constantly looking for a meaningful life, but at the same time removes the substance of anything that could potentially give life meaning. Anything, which could give substance to life and which could offer an intrinsic fulfilment to it, is made into something subjective, an individual lifestyle. That is why a consistent subjectivism must lead to emptiness. In a world where only subjective life fulfilment is of importance, every fulfilment loses its substance. The penetrating question that Taylor addresses to our time, is whether this subjectification does not generate its own forms of violence, viz. a violence that results from being swayed by the issues of the day, and from a rejection of the images of the good life handed down by religion or tradition. Here we are confronted with the existential core of the violence of subjectification.

The problems of this subjectification appear most clearly when we take a look at the issue of violence itself. From the perspective of a consistent nihilistic subjectivism, the violence of objectifying, controlling reason is



only a subjectivist construction. It only acquires a meaning from my subjective, finite perspective, but has no objective reality, no truth. But if this is so, no ethical appeal can emanate from violence, inspiring one to rise against it. For the strength of such an appeal lies precisely in the fact that it penetrates into my subjectivity and subverts my preconceived, subjective ideas. Moreover, it only counts as an *ethical* appeal to the extent that it does not appeal to my subjective feeling of pity, but to the recognition that the violence of controlling, totalitarian reason really or truly is an injustice, against which action has to be taken. An appeal only has ethical relevance to the degree that it refers to an order beyond my subjectivity, which is violated and has to be restored. For weak thinking, however, such recognition constitutes a relapse into objectifying metaphysics. The ethics of non-violent love cannot solve this problem, since it is purely formal and rejects every substantial determination of the good.

This massive equation of objectivity and the meaning of history with violence creates yet another problem. Since every objectification is by definition identical with violence, and is radically opposed to the ethics of non-violence, a differentiation of forms of violence is impossible. Nevertheless, it is evident that one kind of violence is not the same as another. There is the violence, which is the inevitable result of the finitude of thinking and acting humans. The nature of human thinking is to determine reality conceptually, however conscious we are of the fact that such determinations have their limitations, in the sense that they exclude certain aspects of reality. "*Omnis determinatio est negatio*", as Spinoza put it. A wholly adequate determination of reality in its infinite diversity is impossible for man as a finite thinking being. Therefore it is of crucial importance to produce a multiplicity of determinations that dialogue and perhaps compete with one another. Human action has similar features. We are constantly confronted with the necessity to act (ethically) in specific situations, although we know well enough that every act produces advantages for the one and disadvantages for the other, and that one act excludes other, possibly equally ethical, acts. No more than we can grasp with our thinking the absolute truth, can we achieve with our action the absolute good. We are confronted here with the tragic dimension of human existence, the unavoidable tension between the infinity of the true and the good, which we seek, and our finitude as thinking and acting beings. Perhaps one could qualify this finitude as a kind of structural violence.<sup>10</sup> But even if this were the case, a clear distinction would

<sup>10</sup> However, I wonder whether such a qualification is correct, since it deprives the notion of violence of its ethical connotation.

have to be made between this tragic finitude on the one hand, and violence that is ethically reprehensible on the other. There is a fundamental difference between our incapacity to grasp all aspects of a problem with our concepts, and ideological deceit, which involves deliberately ignoring certain aspects of a situation. Similarly, there is a difference between the innocent victims of every struggle and the conscious sacrifice of innocent people for the sake of one's own interests. If all objectivity is violent, if every attempt to distinguish sense and nonsense, is an inadmissible coup of reason, if every human thinking and acting is structurally violent, then it becomes impossible to make these essential distinctions. In sum, the implications of Vattimo's option to dissolve all strong structures of the true and the good, and to replace them with weak thinking and an ethics of non-violence, run counter to the human condition. An ethics of non-violence promises more than it can possibly deliver.

One could object to my critical remarks that Vattimo sees the *caritas*, the commandment of love, as a bound to secularisation and nihilism. His rejection of fixed, objective truth by no means ends in a nihilistic repudiation of all religion and ethics, but results in an ardent religious plea for a salvation which has commenced definitively with the incarnation of Christ. It seems important to me to take this objection seriously by examining whether *caritas* really can confine secularisation, nihilism and subjectification. In doing so, I hope not only to do justice to the intention of Vattimo's book, but also to examine the passableness of a route which is quite popular in the thinking of many committed Christians.<sup>11</sup> The content of the commandment of love can be summarised most adequately in Augustine's maxim, '*Dilige, et quod vis fac*' (Love, and do what you will) (*Belief*, 64). Vattimo regularly refers to the bond of friendship, which holds together God and humankind, and which is to replace the old relation of servitude. My critical question in this respect concerns not so much the content, but rather the nature of this commandment. What is the status of the commandment of love in the context of weak thinking? According to Vattimo, "the commandment of love [...] cannot be secularised, because (if you will) it is a 'formal' commandment, not unlike Kant's categorical imperative, which does not command something specific once and for all, but rather applications that must be 'invented' in dialogue with specific situations and in light of what the holy Scriptures have revealed" (*Belief*, 66). In my view, Vattimo introduces a foreign element here, which disorders his weak thinking completely. He states that the status of the commandment of love is comparable to Kant's categorical

<sup>11</sup> This approach means that I shall abstain from a critical discussion of the serious problems involved in Vattimo's radical opposition between truth and the history of salvation.

imperative. But how can we think this categorical essence of Christianity? Above, we saw that weak thinking dissolves every fixed meaning of humanity and the world into a thoroughly contingent, historical and local occurrence. In such a world, everything is hypothetical, i.e. subject to circumstance, place and time. How can something categorical arise out of this world, something that exceeds finitude and dependence on place and time? This seems to refer to a transcendent sphere. But Vattimo stigmatises this as sacral violence. It would re-establish the relation of servitude between God and humanity, jeopardising the very project of secularising Christianity. Consequently, the limiting of secularisation by the commandment of love is nothing but an arbitrary decision on the part of Vattimo as an individual. Once thinking begins to unmask every representation of the sacral, as well as the sacral itself, as violence, once secularised reason begins to demythologise morality and dogma as historical constructions etc., then it cannot stop short at the commandment of love as something sacrosanct anymore. If one wants to do this nevertheless, then such a decision appears from the perspective of radical nihilism as an expression of violent arbitrariness. It is impossible to be – as Vattimo seems to want to be – just a little nihilistic, and then, at the sight of certain fateful consequences, to try to switch sides quickly and indiscernibly.

#### 4. Beyond secularisation?

After my critical discussion of Vattimo's project, the question remains of how to find a way out of the problems of modernity, analysed above, and of the way in which Christianity might contribute to this. At the end of his book<sup>12</sup> Taylor – like Vattimo in a way – poses precisely this question. In previous paragraphs, I have frequently spoken of substantial good, of what is true and valuable as such – in short: of concepts referring to a sphere that surpasses the individual subject. It appeared to be necessary to introduce these notions as points of resistance in order not to be caught off guard by instrumentalist reason and the modern idea of individual self-expression. As is commonly known, Christian religion has a long tradition of attention to the intrinsically true and good. The transcendentalia, to put it in terms of medieval theology, are not subjected to the instrumental and reductive thinking and acting of our times, because they are ultimately names proper to God, belonging to Him in an eminent way. The stories of the Bible and the Christian tradition bring contemporary people into contact with the content of these notions, offering them

<sup>12</sup> Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 518 ff.

rituals, through which they can express and celebrate their gratitude for these gifts of God. We belong to a generation that has discovered the terrible consequences of the project of a self-willed, technically controlling and radically planning reason for civilisation. This has brought quite a number of people to a recognition of the importance of Christian religion as one of the safeguards of the intrinsically true and good.

Taylor is very well aware, however, of the dangers of these ideals of truth and goodness. From a historical perspective, they are interwoven with various kinds of exclusion and dominance. The highest spiritual ideals and aspirations of human history (both religious and non-religious) threaten to lay the most crushing burdens upon mankind. They have often proved chalices filled with poison, the cause of innumerable griefs and even cruelties. At this point, the distressing question arises whether a choice in favour of these encompassing visions on man and the world does not necessarily imply that we have to take exclusion, oppression and terror into the bargain. If this is so, it is after all better to give up on such visions completely in favour of a sober, scientific, secular humanism, without any religious dimension or radical hope in history. That would also mean, however, that we no longer have the option to pursue some of our most basic and powerful spiritual aspirations – aspirations that have motivated the highest moral and spiritual manifestations of our civilisation. Are we confronted with an insoluble dilemma, in the sense that a high price must be paid whatever option we decide upon? If we keep in mind the many millions of people smitten for the sake of these ideals, it seems safer to opt for a secular and sober humanism. As I noted above, this is somehow the strength thinking developed during the Enlightenment, which Vattimo also promotes. At this point, our examination of the prospects of Christianity for contemporary humanity seems to have arrived at an impasse.

Let us examine this point more closely, since it is of vital importance to my guiding question about the prospects of Christianity. As I have stated above, a feeling of discontent regularly sneaks up on contemporary people when they try to interpret their own time, modernity. For they are confronted time and again with its violent character. This awareness causes a fracture in the relation of contemporary humanity to modernity, to the extent that they are forced to distance themselves somewhat from the comfortable success-stories through which modernity usually eases its own conscience. In this sense one can justifiably state that they are sitting on the shoulders of modernity. From this position, they examine the reasons upon which their discontent is founded, and try to find ways of dealing with it. With regard to the latter, we have seen that Vattimo's proposal of a subjectification of all truth and value, and the secularisa-

tion of all transcendence does not succeed. Therefore we need to examine other ways. From a Christian perspective, the question arises whether alternative answers can be given to the questions of our time. If this appears to be so, Christianity really offers something essential to contemporary humanity.

What kind of discontent is precisely at stake here? Both Vattimo and Taylor show clearly that modernity produced a specific violence of (technological and political) reason, resulting in various mechanisms of oppression. In a broader context, they point to the fact that these mechanisms arise when human pronouncements, rules, laws and commands are bestowed with the aura of God's sovereign, transcendent will. Taylor reminds us of the historical lesson that the highest spiritual ideals and aspirations of human history have laid the most crushing burdens upon mankind. Modernity has had very bad experiences with the historically indisputable fact that all sorts of human decisions have been presented as identical with God's will or resulting from God's plan for the salvation of the world. From his side, Vattimo pointed to the repression, which results from ecclesiastical authoritarianism in the fields of morality and dogmatics.

Let us try to give an alternative answer to this intriguing, but at the same time extremely complicated, question. A central characteristic of Christianity is the promise of a divine affirmation of humanity and its world. This affirmation is implied in the faith that God is concerned about human salvation. Its most exemplary expression is the incarnation of Christ, and the Spirit working in history. However, it is essential to realise that this salvation comes from God; His grace transcends this world. On the basis of the faith that God is God, Christian religion challenges every human claim to the fulfilment of the promise of God's salvation, every appropriation of the Spirit by humans, every human manipulation of truth and value. From a religious perspective, the vital issue of the eschatological reservation is at stake here. From a philosophical point of view, the issue is to look for something which, because of its irreducible transcendence, offers resistance to every attempt of humanity to take control of God's truth and to subject it to its own possessive power. Thus God's irreducible transcendence protects humanity from itself – more specifically from the deeply rooted temptation to act in a high-handed fashion, from the illusion that humans can freely and autonomously dispose of truth and value. It concerns the temptation of humanity making itself into a god, and by doing so justifying the violence of manipulating (technological or political) reason. The awareness of God's irreducible transcendence confronts humanity with the illusory character of its desires and thus protects people against themselves. This transcendence is also a source of resistance against the violence

of subjectifying reason, which reduces all truth and every value to a subjective construction and thus carries out a coup as well. Consequently, the reference to transcendence is not necessarily something violent or oppressive, as Vattimo suggests incorrectly. In stressing God's divinity, Christian religion wants to clarify that humans, as finite, historical beings, cannot dispose of the true and the good.

With this, I conclude my analysis of the prospects of Christianity in modern times. I have refrained as far as possible from predicting future developments in either modern civilisation or Christian religion. We just have to admit the possibility that civilisation or religion might develop in pathological ways, at least temporarily. For modern civilisation this would imply that it would not be able to resist the dominance of controlling reason in technology and politics, nor would it be capable of coping with the violence of the subjectification of truth and value. Religion for its part can develop in a pathological way as well by forgetting the crucial importance of the eschatological reservation, or by reinforcing ecclesiastical authoritarianism. The question that I did try to answer was a principal rather than a factual one. Can Christian religion offer something essential to contemporary humanity – more specifically: Can it present a way out of the crisis in which humanity is so manifestly caught? With the help of some ideas of Charles Taylor, I have tried to demonstrate that an interpretation of Christianity, which stresses the subjectification of the message of salvation and the secularisation of its transcendent character, perpetuates and reinforces this crisis rather than solving it. On the basis of this negative result I tried to show that the essential contribution of Christian religion to modern humanity lies in its offering to humanity a perspective that protects people against the dangerous temptation of omnipotence. God's transcendence systematically brackets the self-willed character of the world and the violence resulting from it. Hence the title of this article: in the world, but not of the world.

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